

**Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Trinity Church, January 29, 2012**  
**Mark 1:21-28**

Saint Mark was a man in a hurry. He had good news to tell and he wasted no time getting to the heart of the matter. It takes Mark about four razor- sharp paragraphs to get to the meat of his message. The Gospel simply leaps forward. There are no prefaces, no genealogies, no stories of Jesus' birth, no philosophical or theological reflections. Jesus is prophesied, he appears, he is baptized. The wilderness temptation is described in just two sentences. Jesus calls his disciples and then he makes his first appearance as a teacher in the synagogue at Capernaum and it is there and then that Jesus laid out the dimensions of his ministry.

There is a word that Mark uses again and again. It's a Greek word and I'm not going to lay that on you, but it is a word that whenever, wherever, it appears it gives an impression of urgency and the feeling that something is happening right now. When Jesus called his disciples – last week's Gospel -- they didn't just follow, they dropped their nets and followed "immediately."

"Immediately." That's what Mark's signature word means and he uses it again and again. The word applies to Jesus himself, his words, his actions. It contains the sense, not just of timing, not just of haste, but also of purpose. Jesus is a man with a mission and that sense of focused and urgent purpose is precisely what Mark's favorite word captures. The venerable King James version calls it "straightway." Jesus loses no time on diversions.

It is this sense of energy, urgency, excitement and purpose that shapes our worship on this our annual day of stock-taking and re-examining our purposes, our responses to the call of Christ.

It takes Mark about five short paragraphs to get to the remarkable passage that is the lesson for today. And it is a remarkable passage, not just because of its urgency, but because it puts the whole Gospel in a nutshell. It is a capsule outline of all that is to follow.

Jesus and his disciples came to Capernaum and "immediately" on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and began to teach. Now if any of you are sneaking a look at your lesson leaflet – and I hope you are – you will see that "immediately" isn't in there. But it is. It's in the original text, and it baffles me as to why the modern translators left it out. The momentum of the story suffers, and I refuse to let that happen. Jesus strode into the synagogue, seated himself in the rabbi's seat and began to teach in a way that had never been heard before.

Mark doesn't tell us exactly what Jesus said, only that he spoke with an astonishing originality far different from all other religious teachers, an authority that no other teacher

would dare to assume. It foreshadows what he would say over short time left to him. Other rabbis would say, “This is the truth about God. This is what the prophets say. This is what the scholars say. But Jesus says, “I am the truth about God. I am God’s way. I am life that is the real life. I forgive you and heal you. Don’t be afraid, because I have already overcome the deadly, deadening forces of the world. All of that is wrapped up in the force of what the Gospel calls authority. It is authority not certified by some license granted, but by a power of character that could only be ascribed to God’s self.

Something happened. Something happened “immediately.” Sneak another look. The leaflet says, “Just then,” Mark’s own text says, “immediately.” Immediately there was a violent outburst by a deeply-disturbed person, a person who had “an unclean spirit.” He was possessed by demons. In our more delicate language we would say that he was “mentally ill,” but there was a lot more to it than that. When Jesus drew out those demons – when he exorcised them – it was more than a demonstration of divine power. It was the final encounter between God and the forces of evil, dramatized, played out, there in the Capernaum synagogue, because evil is real. Call it what you like. Call it the devil, if you will. Exorcism is not just the province of schlocky films. It is the encounter between ultimate good and real and substantive evil buried deep in the human soul; and its aim, as was Jesus’ aim, is psychic and spiritual healing.

The healing of this deeply troubled person was also Jesus’ declaration of his mission among all humanity. The unclean spirit works its secret malice at the root of our human nature. Jesus came to cleanse and to heal. He is here now, and so are the demons. Scratch the surface of any congregation and you will find people who harbor demonic compulsions, compulsions that overcome the will, or threaten to. Healing is in order with most, if not all of us, and certainly with the community that we share.

James Wright was an American poet and winner of a Pulitzer Prize in poetry. For a time he taught at Macalester College in St. Paul. As a poet he was deeply sensitive to human poverty and suffering and isolation, and those things deeply influenced his writing. He also had his own devils. He lost his family and his job to alcoholism. Wright was deeply moved when some friends asked him, in spite of his reputation, to be sponsor at the baptism of their child. But his parents warned him that as a part of the baptism he would be asked to renounce the devil and all his works. Could he do that? With enthusiasm, Wright replied, “Hell, yes!” They had to convince him that a simple, “I do,” would be sufficient.

Christopher Smart was also a poet, an English poet who died in 1771. He also had his demons and was committed for a time to a mental asylum. His particular bizarre behavior was a bit like the man in the Capernaum synagogue. He had the compulsive habit of suddenly bursting into loud and confused prayer at inappropriate times and places, so that, according to one report, “the whole company was routed.”

While he was in his asylum, Smart wrote a long religious poem called *Rejoice in the Lamb*. Much of it is incoherent jibberish, but in the midst of that confusion there are flashes of humor and also moments of pure spiritual exaltation. Benjamin Britten, English composer, wrote a cantata using parts of the poem. June and I once sang in it, and some of you may have heard it at one time or another. Some verses that reveal an underlying spiritual torment, like these poignant lines:

*For I am under the same accusation as my Saviour,  
For they said, "He is beside himself," ...*

And then there are passages, strange passages, but ones that speak of pure and sublime spiritual relief and exaltation. He writes of the music that calms his troubled spirit :

*For the trumpet of God is a blessed intelligence  
And so are all the instruments in Heav'n.  
For God the Father Almighty plays upon the harp  
Of stupendous magnitude and melody.  
For at that time malignity ceases  
And the devils themselves are at peace.  
For this time is perceptible to man  
By a remarkable stillness and serenity of soul.*

Jesus' urgent energy affected the ones who heard him. "And *immediately* his reputation spread." So reads the Gospel. It is this excitement in his love and service that Christ commends to his Church. In his manifesto in the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus took an immense risk. It was a risk shared by the ones who so very recently joined him as followers. Can we offer less, when the only risk is indifference?

The outcome of the appearance in Capernaum was explosive. At once, his reputation began to spread. To continue that momentum in this place is exactly what we will be about today -- immediately.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

